



By Craig R. Laing

*Twenty-nine photos accompany this article. They are on pages four through eleven.*

Most Americans lack accurate mental images of what China looks like. For example, geography textbooks often present students with a limited range of Chinese images such as terraced rice fields, a modern city skyline, or historical landscapes such as the Forbidden City or the Great Wall. As a result, Americans have an extremely limited, often inaccurate, perception of the structures in China's everyday built environment. Many Westerners have difficulty understanding China, which makes what one sees on the landscape even harder to comprehend. A recent travel writer summed up this challenge with the title to his book *Lost On Planet China: The Strange and True Story of One Man's Attempt to Understand the World's Most Mystifying Nation*.<sup>1</sup> So, what does the built environment of China look like? What can a Westerner visiting China expect to see? This article attempts to answer these questions.

Geographers refer to the built environment as a cultural landscape. One scholar defined a cultural landscape as simply what you see when you go outside.<sup>2</sup> A cultural landscape is the visible result on the earth's surface of the interaction between a culture and its

natural environment. While the word "landscape," particularly in an Asian context, invokes images of well-manicured Japanese gardens or old Chinese paintings of mountains, this article will emphasize one type of cultural landscape, namely a vernacular (or ordinary) cultural landscape.

*[These are] the everyday landscapes that people create in the course of their lives together. From crowded city centers to leafy suburbs and quiet rural villages, these are landscapes that are lived in and changed and that in turn influence and change the perceptions, values, and behaviors of the people who live and work in them.*<sup>3</sup>

The importance of vernacular cultural landscapes are echoed in the words of another scholar, who claimed that they provide

*A cultural landscape is the visible result on the earth's surface of the interaction between a culture and its natural environment.*

*strong evidence of the kind of people we are, and were, and are in the process of becoming. In other words, the culture of any nation is unintentionally reflected in its ordinary vernacular landscape.*<sup>4</sup>

With a land as vast and populated as China, it is a daunting task to identify characteristics in its vernacular cultural landscapes, but there are some common features that can be identified and contribute to a greater understanding of the country. This

article does not attempt to provide a comprehensive assessment of China's cultural landscapes, but only my observations of them, as a student of cultural landscapes in the regions of China that I have visited, Yunnan Province, Beijing, Xi'an, the Yellow Mountains, Suzhou, Nanjing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong.

At the most general level, the character and look of China's cultural landscapes are heavily influenced by population density and the amount of arable land. George Cressey, a geologist and geographer, wrote, *The most significant element in the Chinese landscape is thus not the soil or vegetation or the climate, but, the people. Everywhere there are human beings. In this old, old land, one can scarcely find a spot unmodified by man and his activities.*<sup>5</sup>

While China and the US are comparable in territorial size, China has four times the population of the US, and most of that population lives in the eastern half of the country. Imagine taking the entire population of the US, moving them east of the Mississippi River, and multiplying that population by four. The resultant density is similar to what is experienced daily by those living in eastern China. What surprised me the most were not the high population densities in the urban areas of eastern China (that was expected), but the densities experienced in rural eastern China. In the US, rural is often synonymous with few people, not so in rural China. Rural population densities are higher in China than the US, and the more labor-intensive nature of agriculture in rural China compared to the US contributes to a much busier rural scene. In addition, only 31 percent of China is comprised of basins and plains, so space is at a premium, leading to cultural landscapes that are manipulated to maximize human use of the land. As a result, little land goes unused, as can be seen in Figure 1 where agricultural fields occupy as much space as possible and come right up to the house.

China's rural landscapes are generally characterized by a clustered settlement pattern, meaning that farmers tend to live in settlements and travel to their fields. As a result, there is a large volume of pedestrian/bicycle traffic on roads because farmers must travel to and from their fields. Such a spatial pattern is opposite of what is found in much of the US Midwest, where rural residents live dispersed among agricultural fields. Figure 2 is an aerial view of this Chinese type of settlement pattern. Notice in Figure 3 how all homes are clustered together in the center of the photograph, with agricultural fields surrounding the settlement. Visually, this creates a dramatic transition between urban and rural at the edge of the settlement. For example, Figure 4 is a view arriving in a village; the buildings to the left are the edge of the village, and the agricultural fields to the right continue out of camera range until you arrive at the next village. In this case, there is no suburban transition between urban and rural.

In China, life is lived on the streets much more than in the

US, and such space is an integral part of the daily lives of citizens. For example, street markets are found throughout China in a variety of locations, including urban, rural, and roadside settings (Figure 5). Produce comprises a significant percentage of the items sold in such markets. During an early-morning stroll through the streets of Shangri-La (formerly Zhongdian), I watched as a local farmer with a wagon full of fresh produce stopped in front of a number of restaurants as employees purchased items (Figure 6). As I passed this street a little later, restaurant employees were cleaning the produce on the sidewalk in preparation for the day's menu.

However, one of the more unexpected activities that occurred on the sidewalks was local citizens playing billiards (Figure 7). On several occasions, I saw billiard tables on sidewalks, usually covered with a lean-to for protection against the weather. Why is billiards more of an outdoor game in China than in the US? One possible reason is because the popularity of billiards in China is such a recent phenomenon (late 1980s), and because the table consumes a considerable amount of floor space, most homes and establishments do not have available space or are not designed to make room for a billiard table. Also, since many Chinese games are played outside, anyway, placing billiards tables outside is not seen as much of a cultural anomaly as it would be in the US.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most common items on the Chinese street is the bicycle. Bicycles and similar motorized and nonmotorized vehicles have influenced the character of Chinese cities. Space has even been carved out of the urban fabric for them as seen in this bicycle/scooter lane (top center of the photograph) in Nanjing between the sidewalk and the road (Figure 8).

While house types vary across China, courtyards and forecourts are two residential architectural elements that are common throughout the country. Both of these elements are spatial expressions of a need for private outside space in a society of high population densities. Buildings with rooms often surround courtyards and forecourts in various arrangements, including buildings on all four sides, creating a central courtyard (Figure 9); buildings on three sides (U-shaped); and buildings on two sides (L-shaped). When buildings are absent from a side, walls usually fill the space to enclose the courtyard or forecourt. These courtyards or forecourts serve as the activity center for the inhabitants, and household activities that take place here are varied. I witnessed these courtyards serving as a place to dry laundry, cook, perform certain agricultural tasks, and house cages for racing pigeons. Figure 10 shows a variation of the courtyard house, with buildings on four sides and one side having a gap for a driveway leading directly into the courtyard. In the foreground of Figure 11 is a four-sided courtyard house subdivided into a number of apartments made of cinder blocks and metal roofs, which lack many distinctly Chinese architectural details. The clutter in the courtyard attests to the im-

portant functionality of this space. Another variant of the courtyard house is one where rooms frame three sides of the courtyard in an inverted U-shaped fashion, while the fourth side is a wall. Figure 12 is an example of one of these, as the front two gables form two sides of the house with rooms, and a third side with rooms is barely visible as a roof line in the background. The fourth side is a wall that is between the two front-facing gables and inscribed with Chinese language characters.

A forecourt is what a Westerner would call a front yard, but in China, this outside space in front of the house is typically walled with a gate to create private space. Examples of forecourts abound throughout China. The house in Figure 1 showed a small forecourt created by walls surrounding several sides of the house. The forecourt for the house in Figure 13 is created with the concrete wall, windows, and a gate with red pillars. Even the house in Figure 14 with its contemporary Western architectural elements still retains the forecourt with wall and gate. Notice that the gate is accented on each side with Greek columns. Figure 15 is a good example of how the built environment can often reflect broader societal forces. In many minority-dominated areas, Chinese (or Han) populations have been increasing for decades, and the house in Figure 15 is a reflection of this demographic change through its combination of Tibetan and Chinese architectural styles. This photograph was taken in northern Yunnan Province, an area of predominately Tibetan populations, and while the house is Tibetan in style, the wall and gate surrounding the forecourt is Chinese.

Although China is still ruled by a government that is officially “Communist,” beginning in 1979, the late Deng Xiaoping and his predecessors transformed the economy into primarily a capitalist system. The pre-reform era (1949–1979) involved the rise of the state as the most influential shaper of the built environment and resulted in a rather authoritarian cultural landscape characterized by a drab, monotonous, box-like architecture, as seen in Figure 16. This style is found in all regions of China, particularly those settled by the Chinese, but increasingly so, in areas like Lijiang, where Chinese have migrated into regions initially settled by non-Chinese. Another such region is Tibet and Tibetan-settled areas in Yunnan, Sichuan, and Qinghai Provinces (see Figure 15). These areas have seen an increase in the drab, sterile architecture of the pre-reform Communist era that stands in stark contrast to traditional Tibetan architectural elements. The spatial impact of this period on China’s cultural landscape has been significant and can be easily overlooked by the visitor because of its lack of aesthetics and the tremendous changes wrought by the country’s recent modernization.

Visitors are often exposed to this unremarkable architecture and may not even be aware of it. A case in point is *danwei*, which are self-contained work units where an individu-

al and family not only works, but lives, shops, and socializes. A variety of social services are offered for *danwei* residents, such as education, health care, retail, and recreation. *Danwei* were typically walled with buildings facing inward to encourage cohesion among unit members.<sup>7</sup> Although most functioning *danwei* were abolished in the economic reforms that occurred, some are still operational. On two separate occasions, I witnessed government-owned restaurants operating as *danwei*. The Golden Celestial Restaurant in Figure 17, between Beijing and the Great Wall, is on the site of a former *danwei* factory. The restaurant and gift shop are in the former factory, and the employees of these establishments live in housing once occupied by factory workers. Evidence of another *danwei* was found in the small tourist town of Tangkou in the Yellow Mountains of southern Anhui Province. After arriving late one evening in Tangkou, our group was taken to a government-owned restaurant’s dining room on the second floor of the building shown in Figure 18. To get to the restaurant, we were escorted through a gift shop on the first floor that was closed for the evening. After dinner, we were escorted downstairs, through the now-open gift shop, where about a dozen employees were ready to assist our group of about thirty people. Our hosts explained that the gift shop manager was able to summon employees on the spur of the moment for this late dining group because they all lived within walking distance.

Another landscape feature that is a holdover from the pre-reform Communist era is the presence of government-sponsored billboards. While billboards during this era were almost exclusively government-sponsored, they are overwhelmed on the landscape by commercial ones today, though government-sponsored billboards still exist.<sup>8</sup> The billboard in Figure 19 was sponsored by a local government and found outside of Lintong, near the site of the terra-cotta warriors. The billboard includes two saluting officials with the following message: “Build Lintong into a city famous for tourism in China and a district strong in economy in Xi’an.” Another nearby billboard by a different local government displays two saluting officials and promotes the safety, security, and accessibility of local highways.

During the reform era (post-1979), China has witnessed some of the most dramatic changes to its cultural landscapes. One industry to emerge and create its own distinct cultural landscapes—experienced by many visiting Westerners—is tourism. During the Mao years, domestic and international tourism was ignored and practically nonexistent because of its association with capitalism and consumerism. In China today, tourism is an essential part of economic development strategies. Tourism in China has grown from practically nothing in the late 1970s to being third in the world for international tourist arrivals and receipts.<sup>9</sup> This ranking does not even represent the large number of domestic tourists who are estimated to pump about \$122 billion a year into the coun-





Figure 1 (above). High population densities and limited land resources lead to little idle land, Anhui Province.



Figure 3 (above). Another view of the clustered settlement pattern, Yunnan Province. Notice the homes clustered in the center of the photograph with agricultural fields surrounding them. Also, notice the tourist attraction in the foreground.



Figure 5 (left, upper right, and lower right). Various street markets. On the left is an urban produce market in Nanjing. On the upper right is a roadside market in Yunnan Province, and below right is a village market in Yunnan Province.



Figure 2 (above). Aerial view of the clustered settlement pattern that characterizes much of rural China, Yunnan Province.



Figure 4 (above). The sharp land use changes as a result of a clustered settlement pattern, Yunnan Province. Buildings to the left are the edge of the village, and the agricultural fields to the right continue out of camera range until you arrive at the next village.







Figure 6 (above). Local farmer selling fresh produce to restaurant employees, Shangri-La (formerly Zhongdian).



Figure 7 (above). A rather common scene on the Chinese cultural landscape: a billiard table on the sidewalk with a lean-to cover, Shangri-La.

Figure 8 (right). Note the bicycle/scooter lane between the sidewalk and automobile traffic lanes in Nanjing in the top center of the photograph. This transportation space is common in many Chinese cities. It was interesting to watch these individuals as they fanned out wide through the intersection, but as they crossed the street, they all funneled back into the bicycle/scooter lane just out of camera range at the bottom of the photograph.

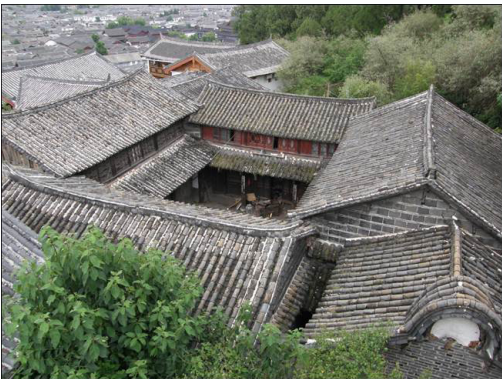


Figure 9 (left and right). Views of central courtyard houses with buildings on four sides, Lijiang (left), near Dali (right), Yunnan Province.





Figure 10 (right). Variation of a courtyard house with buildings on four sides, Yunnan Province. In this case, one side has a short side, allowing for a driveway directly into the courtyard.



Figure 11 (above). This four-sided courtyard house is made of concrete blocks and metal roofs and is subdivided into several apartments, Shangri-La.



Figure 12 (above). An inverted U-shaped courtyard house with rooms forming three sides and a wall with Chinese characters (between the two front facing gables) forming the fourth side, Yunnan Province.



Figure 13 (above). This side-gabled house has a forecourt created by the concrete wall (with windows) and gate with red pillars, Anhui Province.



Figure 14 (left). This house with contemporary Western architectural elements still retains the forecourt with walls and gate, Shangri-La. Note the Greek columns on either side of the gate.



Figure 15 (above). An example of how elements of the cultural landscape can reflect broader social forces. In the part of Yunnan Province where this photograph was taken, Tibetans are in the majority, but Chinese populations have been migrating here for decades. This house has been built in the Tibetan style but the forecourt was created using Chinese-style walls and gate.





Figure 16 (left). The skyline of Lijiang as an example of the drab, monotonous, box-like architecture that characterized new construction in China's built environment during the pre-reform Communist era (1949–1979).



Figure 17 (left and below). The Golden Celestial Restaurant between Beijing and the Great Wall operates as a *danwei*. The former factory building now houses a gift shop on the first floor and restaurant on the second floor. The photograph on the lower right shows buildings used to provide a variety of social services when the factory was open. It is unclear what purpose they serve now. The photograph on the lower left shows housing that was used by factory workers, but now houses the restaurant and gift shop employees. All photographs were taken from the same location, but from different angles.



Figure 18 (right). This building houses a gift shop on the first floor, a restaurant on the second floor, and employee apartments on the upper floors, in the tourist town of Tangkou, near the Yellow Mountains in southern Anhui Province. It apparently operates as a *danwei*, according to the story described in the article.







Figure 19 (left). A local government billboard promoting economic development in the city of Lintong and the Xi'an District says, "Build Lintong into a city famous for tourism in China and a district strong in economy in Xi'an." The terra-cotta warriors site is nearby.



Figure 20 (above). Souvenir stalls within the walls of the Forbidden City, Beijing.



Figure 21 (left). This gift shop is near the entrance to the Stone Forest in Yunnan Province. The first floor sells a variety of handmade arts and crafts by Yunnan's minority populations, and the Cloud and Rock Restaurant is on the second floor.



Figure 22 (right). Tourists visiting the Stone Forest, Yunnan Province.





Figure 23 (left). The Yunnan Nationalities Museum is a themed cultural park built by the provincial government to showcase the various minority groups that live in Yunnan Province. Visitors stroll through exhibits that portray house types and include demonstrations of that minority's cultural practices, including cooking, music, dance, and arts and crafts. The individuals in the photograph are park employees in minority dress preparing for a dance performance.



Figure 24 (left and bottom left). The government's shift in policy at the beginning of the reform era to allow individuals to own businesses has dramatically impacted China's cultural landscapes. These roadside structures indicate one landscape development resulting from this shift in policy as people construct buildings specifically for private businesses. Notice how these structures are built next to the road and contain business space on the ground floor and residential space on upper floors. The photograph to the left is a family-owned restaurant near Tiger Leaping Gorge in Yunnan Province that specializes in local chicken dishes. In all likelihood, the owner's family and restaurant employees live on the upper floors. While it is not apparent what the ground floor is used for in the photograph to the left, the building's layout does not preclude this from being used for business space. This photograph was taken in Anhui Province.



Figure 25 (above). Dismantling a traditional neighborhood to make way for new, modern construction in Shanghai.





Figure 26. These photographs show Lijiang's "new town" (above left) and "old town" (above right). These photographs were taken within several blocks of each other. Such contrasting landscapes are increasingly common in Chinese cities as two processes—modernization and the desire to preserve traditional landscapes, largely for tourism purposes—compete for dominance of urban space.

Figure 27 (right). Even the smallest villages, such as this one in Yunnan Province, near Dali, have cell phone stores. China Mobile is a state-owned company that is the country's largest provider of cell phone service.



Figure 28 (above). Man riding a horse and talking on his cell phone in a small village, Yunnan Province.



Figure 29 (above). Nike store in a building using traditional Tibetan architectural elements in Shangri-La.

try's economy.<sup>10</sup> The impact of tourism on China's cultural landscapes, however, is still somewhat limited, partly because of the industry's brief history, language barriers, and the geographic limitation of group tours that prevent many tourists from exploring areas beyond traditional tourist areas. Even in large cities often visited by tourists, there are districts that see very few tourists, and those landscapes have yet to be affected by the tourist industry. Despite this, tourist landscapes are becoming a feature of China's cultural landscapes, including the conversion of historical sites into tourist venues, the creation of man-made attractions, and an array of services to cater to the growing number of tourists.

Many of China's historic sites have undergone significant transformations to accommodate the increasing numbers of tourists. For example, the terra-cotta warriors are housed in several enclosed pits, and the grounds surrounding them consume a considerable amount of land outside Xi'an.<sup>11</sup> China's historic tourist sites are increasingly becoming commercialized within the sites themselves and especially on their perimeters (Figure 20). During most of the 2000s, Starbucks operated a store within the walls of the Forbidden City.<sup>12</sup> Entrepreneurs have popped up along the perimeters of historic sites, such as this gift shop and restaurant adjacent to the entrance to the Stone Forest (Figure 21). Nature is also being commercialized as sites of outstanding natural beauty are shaped into tourist venues. For example, the Stone Forest in eastern Yunnan Province (Figure 22), recognized as a World Heritage Site in 2007, has become a heavily visited destination by both international and domestic tourists. Guides (dressed in Yi minority clothing) escort visitors along a series of paths through the various rock formations. There were a large number of tourists on the day I visited, leading to questions about the sustainability of such practices.

Man-made attractions are another type of space being created by the growth of China's tourist industry. In the foreground of Figure 3, note the constructed tourist attraction along the shores of the small lake with a parking lot (with tourist buses) to the left and numerous structures along a road with a bridge. The location of this tourist attraction is not random, because it is along a major tourist highway and reflects the increasing role that market forces are playing in determining the location of business establishments in a country where state regulation is still of paramount influence. Some manmade attractions use geographic realities as a basis for development. For example, the large and diverse minority populations in Yunnan Province are a major component of the tourist industry and are used as the basis for a large theme park built by the provincial government in the early 1990s in Kunming, called the Yunnan Nationalities Museum (Figure 23). On this site, twenty-five different Yunnan minority groups are displayed and showcased for visitors.

One of the most common cultural landscape elements to emerge during the reform era has been private businesses.

During the pre-reform Communist era, private businesses were not allowed, but when this policy was reversed, millions of Chinese began their own businesses. For most, it was such a risky venture with an unknown outcome that the Chinese referred to such a decision as "jumping into the sea." This phrase was chosen as one of the top ten phrases to enter the Chinese vocabulary as a result of the reform movement, according to a recent survey.<sup>13</sup> This policy change had a dramatic impact on the country's cultural landscape as businesses sprung up all over the country in a variety of settings. One very visible landscape development has been the appearance of roadside structures that include business space on the ground floor and residential space on the upper floors (Figure 24). Such structures were common in areas I visited, and they suggest the changing economic value of roadside space.

One overriding feature of China's current built environment is change. The recent modernization of China's built environment has led to dynamic cultural landscapes. Figure 25 shows a traditional neighborhood being torn down to make way for more apartment buildings like the ones in the background. In cities where there is a significant supply of old structures, the desire to preserve such historic landscapes, largely for tourist purposes, competes with the modernization process (seen in Figure 25) for urban space, often creating contrasting landscapes in close proximity to each other (Figure 26). The ever-changing technology field also contributes to China's dynamic cultural landscapes. It seems that everyone has a cell phone. Even small villages have cell phone stores (Figure 27). The rapid diffusion of cell phone technology creates scenes such as the one in Figure 28 that shows a man on a horse talking on a cell phone.

The degree to which technology has penetrated even the most remote regions of China is evidenced by the following story. Shangri-La is in Yunnan Province, a province in China's southwest near Tibet and Myanmar, at an elevation of about 10,500 feet, which ranks as the third-poorest province based on GDP per capita. Upon walking into a store on the market square, I was immediately drawn to what the two store employees were watching on a small TV. It was a live broadcast of the NBA finals. China's constantly changing cultural landscapes often blend elements of the traditional, modern, and foreign. For example, notice that the Nike store in Shangri-La is located in a modern building that incorporates architectural elements from local Tibetan culture (Figure 29).

This is a good time to develop a better understanding of China's cultural landscapes. If the twenty-first century turns into the "Asian century," as some have predicted, then a better understanding of the character of China's built environment will be necessary. As we better understand the cultural landscapes of China's citizens, the better our relationship with them will be.



## NOTES

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## Further Reading

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